HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY FUR BRIGADES
IN THE
COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT

by

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Origins of the trapping brigade

In the overall history of the North American fur trade, the trapping brigade was an atypical and short-lived phenomenon. From the very early sixteenth century and perhaps even earlier, when French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English fishermen and explorers found the Indians along the coasts of Newfoundland and New England eager to exchange animal pelts for European goods, the basic modus operandi of the trade was to induce the natives to hunt for furs and to deliver them at fixed posts or to traders who moved about among the tribes. These practices are still the rule in northern Alaska, northern Canada, and wherever else a significant native hunting economy has survived. Large-scale hunting and trapping for furs by Europeans was a relatively rare occurrence before the mid eighteenth century.

This is not to say that prior to about 1760 the harvesting of furs personally by Europeans was unknown or that the number

of pelts gathered in this manner was insignificant. As early as 1618 French fur traders along the St. Lawrence feared competition from settlers who "would hunt by themselves."[1] Soon after the Hudson's Bay Company established posts in Rupert's Land its employees were encouraged to hunt and trap for furs under evolving sets of regulations which permitted the men and officers to augment their incomes somewhat by this means.[2]

However, the fur most desired by the traders during this early period was beaver, and the hunting of beavers prior to the introduction of steel traps was a difficult and arduous task best performed by Indians learned in the ways of wild animals. Sometimes the natives used "awkward wooden traps," deadfalls, or similar devices to snare the beavers, but these methods frequently failed. More intensive hunting was possible after iron tools were introduced by Europeans. Beaver dams could be cut and ponds drained, exposing the animals' houses and burrows. By closing all entrances to these refuges with wooden stakes, the hunters could then slaughter their prey with ice chisels affixed to long handles.[3] Another, similar, technique was to use spears to disturb the refuges and then drive the beavers out into nets set between rows of stakes at the entrances.[4]

Extensive beaver hunting by Europeans only became practical after the introduction of the steel beaver trap about the middle of the eighteenth century. According to David Thompson, the great geographer for the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies,

it was the Indians of Canada and New Brunswick who first thought of employing the steel trap, which had long been successfully used to catch foxes and other animals, for the harvesting of beaver. Be this as it may, he was certainly mistaken when he stated that this innovation took place about 1797.[5] Correspondence, inventories, and newspaper advertisements prove conclusively that "beaver traps" were being employed in the British fur trade at Detroit, Montreal, New York, Virginia, and elsewhere at least as early as the 1760s.[6]

But Thompson probably was correct when he wrote that steel traps were at first only moderately successful in catching beaver because no really satisfactory bait could be found. After much searching some natives discovered "by chance" that castoreum -- a musky secretion found in the perineal glands of the beaver -- was an almost irresistable lure. "The secret of this bait was soon spread," said Thompson; "every Indian procured from the traders four to six steel traps . . . . All labour was now at an end; the hunter moved about at pleasure with his traps and infallible bait of castorum."[7] The experienced Nor'Wester, David Harmon, observed that at least by 1818 "the greater part of the Indians" east of the Rocky Mountains were taking their beaver with steel traps.[8]

This change in hunting technique came at an opportune time for the European traders. Even from the beginning of the traffic there had been native groups who were disinclined to hunt beaver

or who were diverted from the chase by intertribal warfare, migrations to seek food, or other causes incident to native life. In short, the natives, even though they were generally increasingly dependent upon European goods, were not always reliable suppliers of furs. The traders discovered that in many cases European hunters were more effective, and they came to depend to a greater extent upon their own personnel and upon the "freemen" -- trappers who were not employed by any company.[9] This development was made possible by the adoption for beaver hunting of the steel trap, a device Europeans could employ with as devastating an effect as could the Indians. But as late as 1797 two prominent Montreal traders were able to state, without too much stretching of the truth, that "all" the furs sent from Canada to England were "had from the Indians in Exchange for British Manufactured goods."[10]

The problem of finding reliable native groups to harvest and barter furs became more acute after the fur trade advanced through the eastern forest belt and out onto the Great Plains and into the Rockies. Many tribes in those regions scorned beaver hunting. They were quite satisfied with their cultures based on the buffalo and the horse. For the most part the only trade goods they craved were guns, ammunition, axes, knives, tobacco, liquor, and a few other items. For these they periodically consented to provide provisions as well as furs or they brought in pelts pillaged from others, but because of their frequent wars and

other diversions they often could not be counted on for a steady supply of beaver pelts.

The experience of David Thompson on the Missouri River in 1797 was typical. Sent by the North West Company to explore the region, he reached the Mandan villages and urged the Indians there to trap beaver and bring the furs north to the firm's posts on the Assiniboine River. But the natives remained noncommittal. They were, he later reported, "well satisfied with their conditions of living" and "preferred to hunt bison."[11]

On the other hand, Lewis and Clark met a Cheyenne chief at the Arikara villages in 1806 who begged the explorers to send traders to his people so that the Cheyennes could learn how to trap beaver. Other Indians, such as the Shoshone, also welcomed the traders and became "past masters of the beaver trap."[12] But on balance many traders west of the Mississippi and of Lake Winnipeg found that the most efficient method of harvesting beaver was to trap the animals themselves.

This accelerated move toward hunting by Europeans and by Indians from distant eastern tribes, particularly by organized groups of employees or bands of freemen as distinguished from trapping by individuals, begins to be obvious in the records during the first decade of the nineteenth century, although the trend began much earlier. Near Rainy Lake in 1800 Daniel Harmon met three canoes of Iroquois bound for the upper Red River to hunt beaver for the North West Company.[13] During that year

Alexander Henry, of the same firm and in the same Red River area, frequently had "all" the employees at his Park River Post out trapping.[14] Eight years later, near the mouth of the Saskatchewan River, Harmon met a trader who had brought a few goods from Canada to "carry on a small traffick with the Natives," and "occasionally to hunt the beaver, &c., himself."[15]

The same trend towards increased trapping by Europeans and by eastern Indians was evident on the United States frontier, particularly after the purchase of Louisiana Territory in 1803. Even before the Lewis and Clark expedition about 150 French Canadians living in the Illinois River area had started to move westward, ascending the Missouri and heading for the mountains, hunting as they went. By the time David Thompson met these freemen in 1809 they were living among the Indians west of the Rockies, their number reduced to a mere twenty-five, largely due to involvement in native wars.[16]

Lewis and Clark encountered a number of small parties of Europeans while traveling up the Missouri in 1804. Most of these men were traders, but several were specifically described as hunters. On the return journey in 1806 other traders and trappers were met, heading for the mountains. John Colter, a member of the exploring party, obtained his discharge to join two of these men for a hunt in the Yellowstone River area.[17] By the time Colter made his way homeward down the Missouri in 1807 the stimulating effect of the Lewis and Clark expedition upon the St. Louis fur

trade was obvious. Above the mouth of the Platte he met a large party of hunters and traders on their way to the Bighorn River under the command of Manuel Lisa.[18] Others were also in the field.

Lisa's reports on the fur riches of the upper Missouri waters were so glowing that a number of St. Louis businessmen joined him in forming the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company. In 1809 the new firm sent about three hundred men to a fort Lisa had established earlier on the Bighorn. A part of this force spent the winter successfully trading and trapping among the Crows. The next spring an expedition was sent to build a fort at the Three Forks of the Missouri. It was intended that the men should trap if a profitable trade could not be opened with the Indians there. Blackfoot hostility soon put an end to this project, but the survivors brought the fruits of their hunting -- thirty packs of beaver pelts -- back to the Bighorn post. Another party under Andrew Henry crossed the Continental Divide in 1810 and built a short-lived fort on the north fork of Snake River -- the first American post west of the Rocky Mountains. Still other detachments were sent to trap among the Arapaho and to the upper Arkansas River. Indian hostility and other misfortunes brought heavy losses in men and money, and by 1812 American traders and trappers alike had largely abandoned the upper Missouri and the northern Rockies.[19]

Revival of the trade in these regions was slow following the

War of 1812. Between 1821 and 1823 a reorganized Missouri Fur Company made a valiant effort, sending some 300 men to the upper Missouri, erecting posts, and trading and trapping. But once more attacks by the Blackfeet brought financial disaster.[20]

Up to this period much of the trapping by Americans on the upper Missouri and beyond, particularly on the part of the larger and more strongly financed companies, had been conducted as an adjunct of trading operations, whether from fixed posts or by mobile parties. Now an additional step was to be taken in the evolution of the trapping brigade.

William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry, both of St. Louis, decided on a new approach to the fur trade of the Far West. No longer would they rely upon Indians to hunt beaver pelts. Trading, while not entirely abandoned, was to be subordinated. Reliance for profits was to be placed mainly on a large force of non-Indian trappers who would be carried to the mountains and then sent far and wide to scour the country for beaver.[21]

The enterprise was publicly launched on February 13, 1822, with the famous advertisement in the Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser offering employment to one hundred "Enterprising Young Men" willing to "ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years."[22] Boat hands, clerks, and perhaps a few other men were to be on wages or salaries, but the hunters and trappers were to receive only their outfits and half the skins they harvested. As has been seen, the free

trapper -- or freeman in British usage -- was no invention of Ashley and Henry, but as Dale Morgan has pointed out, this large influx of unsalaried trappers "would revolutionize the Western fur trade."[23]

Henry started up the Missouri with an advance party early in 1822 and erected a post at the mouth of the Yellowstone. From there and from a replacement fort built during the next year near the mouth of the Big Horn, bands of trappers advanced into the wilderness. One of these expeditions, under the leadership of Jedediah Smith, made the effective discovery of South Pass in 1824, thus opening an easy road across the Rockies and on beyond to the Great Basin and the Snake River region.[24]

The exploitation of these areas, so rich in beaver, required a new method of operation. Up to that point Ashley and Henry had considered it necessary to maintain posts as bases of supply for the field parties and as shipping points for the returns. But during the summer of 1825 Ashley had his scattered bands of trappers meet him on Green River, where he distributed their outfits for the next year and picked up their furs for transport to St. Louis. It became apparent to him that this innovation was more efficient than the old system, since the high cost of maintaining fixed posts could be eliminated and the trappers could be kept longer in the field, particularly during the winter season when pelts were prime. The use of pack horses and wagons to bring in supplies by the shorter Platte River-South Pass route was less

expensive than the traditional employment of boats up the Missouri. Thus the rendezvous was born.[25]

Beginning in the early 1820s, American trappers moved out across the Southwest from bases in Taos and Santa Fé. Small parties and even occasional medium-sized brigades of these hunters operated as far north as the Green River region, the Great Basin, and even the Snake Country. But as a rule these bands found it difficult to compete in the north with the more highly organized and better financed St. Louis and British traders, and they concentrated their efforts in the southern portions of the beaver country. The rendezvous system did not take hold among these hunters. For their purposes the merchants of New Mexico and, later, of a few scattered forts proved adequate sources of supplies and convenient markets for furs.[26]

The origins of the use of organized trapping parties or brigades by the Hudson's Bay Company east of the Rockies is still a little-known subject. Early in 1820 the firm sent a party under Ignace Giasson to explore trade opportunities across the range into New Caledonia -- the present northern interior of British Columbia -- but trapping was also one of its objectives. The men returned with six packs of furs, the fruits "of their own hunts."[27]

While George Simpson was in charge of the Athabasca Department during the winter of 1820-1821 he noted that there were a number of "free" Canadians and Iroquois in the Peace River region.

These men had shown themselves to be better hunters than the native Indians. It was partly to keep these people usefully occupied and partly to meet American competitors from the south in what was thought to be a rich beaver country that a Company officer in 1821 suggested sending a "Hunting Party" into the region between the South Saskatchewan River and the Missouri. Both the Committee in London and Governor Simpson heartily approved, and the Bow River Expedition went into the field during the fall of 1822. The returns were so meager, however, that the enterprise was never repeated.[28]

Early development of the trapping brigade on the Pacific Slope

The evolution of organized trapping parties west of the Rockies certainly was not an independent movement. Techniques evolved in the east were carried across the mountains where they were modified by new conditions. Fortunately, sufficient records are available to permit the changes to be traced with reasonable certainty.

The inland fur trade on the Pacific Slope was pioneered by the enterprising men of the North West Company which operated from Montreal. Pushing up the Peace and North Saskatchewan Rivers, this firm established a number of posts in New Caledonia and in the upper Columbia Basin between 1805 and 1810.[29] From extant journals and correspondence of the leaders involved it appears that practically all the fur returns from these early operations were gained by the traditional method of trading with

the natives. There were, however, a few freemen in the region, particularly among the Flathead and Kutenai Indians, who undoubtedly brought in furs obtained by trapping, and it is possible that employees also engaged in hunting beaver.[30]

When John Jacob Astor, an important fur merchant in New York and Montreal, decided about 1808 to enter the field in the Pacific Northwest he planned to operate on a somewhat different principle from that of the Nor'Westers. Among other things, he provided from the outset for the employment of non-Indian trappers to supplement trade with the natives. The reasons for this decision are not clear. Astor was a close observer of the St. Louis fur trade, and undoubtedly he was aware that Europeans often proved to be more efficient trappers than Indians in the Far West. He also had close contacts with the Nor'Westers and may have learned of their opinion that hostile natives along the immediate shores of the Pacific would preclude normal trading operations there until friendly relations gradually could be established.[31]

Forming the Pacific Fur Company during the summer of 1810, Astor soon dispatched two expeditions to the Oregon Country. One went by sea around the Horn with the objective of founding a base at the mouth of the Columbia River. The second, commanded by Wilson Price Hunt, was to travel overland to unite with the party arriving by sea. On his way west Hunt stopped in St. Louis where, among other things, he hired a few additional men. Several of these were enlisted specifically as "hunters," but in the words

of Washington Irving, they were engaged "not merely to kill game for provisions, but also, and indeed chiefly, to trap beaver and other animals." Hunt also purchased beaver traps in St. Louis.[32] Additional trappers were recruited during the ascent of the Missouri.[33]

After crossing the Continental Divide, the overland party spent the winter of 1811-1812 toiling down the valley of the Snake River and then the Columbia. During this dreadful journey Hunt left two small parties of beaver hunters on the upper waters of the Snake. It has been stated that these men "were probably the first white trappers in the Snake Country.[34] It is perfectly clear, however, that a portion of the region had been trapped during the previous winter by Andrew Henry and his men, several of whom were with Hunt.[35] In any case, the activities of these parties, due to various untoward circumstances, were without final success, though they did serve to confirm previous observations as to the rich beaver resources of the region.

When Hunt reached the mouth of the Columbia during February, 1812, he found that the expedition by sea had long since arrived and had constructed a headquarters post named Astoria. Furthermore, the first arrivals had pushed inland and established a post at Okanogan (1811), and Robert Stuart had explored the Willamette Valley to see if it would be desirable to build another post there. With Stuart on this occasion was a remarkable man, Régis Bruguier, a French-Canadian freeman who had wandered down the

Columbia to "try his luck" with the Americans. Bruguier went along with Stuart "to follow his pursuits as a trapper" and thus apparently became the first free trader to hunt in the Willamette Valley and the forerunner of a group which was to be a powerful force both in motivating and manning future trapping brigades.[36]

After the arrival of Hunt's reinforcements the Astorians vigorously expanded their operations inland. During 1812 posts were established on Thompson's River north of Okanogan; near the junction of the Spokane and Little Spokane Rivers and next to an already erected North West Company post; among the Flatheads; among the Kutenais; and in the Willamette Valley. Apparently business at these stations was largely conducted on the basis of trade with the natives, although there is evidence of trapping by Europeans also. For example, records show that among the furs received at Astoria from the Willamette post before June 1, 1813, were 154 beaver skins from "Corson & Delaunay," free hunters.[37] As far as can be determined, however, trapping from these fixed posts was on a small scale and did not contribute much to the development of the fur brigade as an institution except by increasing the number of freemen and by revealing to them the tempting fur resources of several districts.

More important with respect to future trapping parties were two other Astorian enterprises. The first began in May, 1812, when the partners of the Pacific Fur Company at Astoria

resolved to send one of their number, Donald McKenzie, to "winter" on the Snake river."[38] A better man to undertake this hazardous enterprise could scarcely have been found. McKenzie had passed his apprenticeship in the fur trade as a well-connected young clerk in the North West Company. "Chronically discontented," he left the Nor'Westers and joined the Astor firm, displaying his superb skill as a mountaineer during the overland journey with Hunt. His abundance of nervous energy caused his companions on the Columbia to dub him "Perpetual Motion" McKenzie.[39]

McKenzie ascended the Columbia and then, according to Washington Irving, turned up the Snake River as far as the mouth of the "Shahaptan," which he followed "some distance" and established a post, which might more properly be termed a camp.[40] The location of this establishment is a matter of some dispute among historians, but probably it was on the Clearwater not far from the present Lewiston.[41] He soon found that the Nez Percés in the vicinity "did not take kindly to the idea that they become trappers, pronouncing such work fit only for squaws."[42] But he also discovered that these natives possessed large herds of excellent horses, and after some difficulty he was able to trade for enough to meet the needs of his own party and of Fort Spokane as well.[43]

Not being able to persuade the proud Nez Percés to trap, McKenzie sent out his own men "in various directions" to hunt beaver, but they met with little success. By June 1, 1813, his

inventory of furs amounted to only $488, whereas at the same time Fort Spokane had $5,617.60 in furs on hand, while there were pelts valued at $11,576.65 at Okanogan. Discouraged, McKenzie abandoned his camp and returned to Astoria.[44]

This experience convinced McKenzie that although the Snake River region contained a good stock of beaver, the animals were so scattered that trading from fixed posts would not be profitable. The Nez Percés, the Snakes, and the Shoshones were not always as cooperative as the Kutenais, the Flatheads, and the bands about Okanogan, Thompson River, and Fort Spokane. He came to believe that the Snake Country should be hunted by wandering bands of non-Indian trappers who could seek out the beaver on even the most isolated and distant streams.[45] Such a method of operation would require a change from the traditional fur trader's reliance upon canoes and boats as the chief means of transportation to the use of horses. Few streams in the Snake Country were navigable for any considerable distance. McKenzie's sojourn among the Nez Percés had shown him where those horses could be obtained.

The second Astorian enterprise which was to influence the development of the fur brigade on the Pacific Slope was an expedition sent out from Astoria during the summer of 1813 to "winter in the Snake Country in order to meet with those Hunters already in that quarter" and to trade and trap for furs.[46] The hunters referred to were several of the trappers left in the region by Hunt.

The party was under the command of Clerk John Reed and, after having lost two Canadians and been joined by three of the lost hunters, numbered all told only eight men, one woman, and two children. Reed built a "house" near the mouth of the Boise River, and the men separated into still smaller groups and scattered to the beaver grounds. Indians -- never identified to this day -- fell upon the isolated bands and killed every man. Only the woman, the wife of Pierre Dorian, and her two children managed to escape.[47] This disaster, coming on top of other unpleasant incidents, convinced the traders in the Columbia region that it was not safe for small parties to operate in the Snake Country.

Meanwhile, time had run out for the Astorians. The War of 1812 had ended their prospects for success, and during October, 1813, the partners on the Columbia sold out to their rivals, the Nor'Westers. Many Astorians returned East, but a number joined the North West Company. Others turned themselves loose to become free trappers. Thus the hard-earned lessons learned by the Astorians were kept in memory and within a few years served to influence further steps in the development of the fur brigades.

Evolution of the trapping brigade under the North West Company

If the words of eyewitness Alexander Ross are to be trusted, the North West Company was slow to take advantage of the near-monopoly position it had obtained in the Oregon Country as the result of its purchase of the Astorian enterprise. Its

representatives on the Columbia continued to trade largely from fixed posts, each manager "not deviating from the steps of his predecessor but adhering as much as possible to the old habits and convenience while jaunting up and down the river in the old beaten path," and little effort was made to reduce expenditures. As a result, though the fur returns were increasing annually, the financial balance sheets were a disappointment to the Montreal partners.[48]

The council of "winterers" and agents which met at Fort William on Lake Superior during the summer of 1815 decided to remedy this situation.[49] Among other reforms, operations on the Columbia were to be extended "on the south and east towards California and the mountains, embracing a new and unexplored tract of country." Instead of establishing new permanent posts in these regions which experience had shown to contain "so many warlike and refractory natives," strong trapping parties were to "range" these areas to harvest the furs. And the Columbia region was to be divided into two separate departments, one for the lower river and coast, the other for the inland portion.[50]

How much these radical measures were due to the advice of Donald McKenzie is not known, but it seems most likely that his counsel was sought. He was in the East at the time, having rejoined the North West Company after the failure of Astor's Pacific enterprise. At any rate, he was appointed to head the

inland operations on the Columbia, and he was back at Fort George by early October, 1816.[51]

James Keith, in charge of the coastal section, received McKenzie coldly and refused to give him the men and supplies needed for the inland expansion contemplated by the Fort William council. Not to be deterred, McKenzie took the few resources offered him and set out for his district. "Never during my day had a person for the interior left Fort George with such a motley crew, nor under such discouraging circumstances," observed Alexander Ross.[52] Delayed by ice at the Cascades, McKenzie could do little more that season than visit Okanagan (as the British spelled the name), Spokane House, and perhaps one or two other posts in his district and to make arrangements for the next season.[53]

At Fort George in the spring of 1817 McKenzie received little more cooperation than he had the previous fall. Thus he once more started inland "with a motley and disaffected handful of men, chiefly Iroquois, to prosecute the introductory part of his reform plan."[54] One of his objectives was to move his district headquarters from Spokane House, near the present City of Spokane. Although a comfortable post, it was far from the main communication route along the Columbia, and McKenzie believed it an unsuitable base for his projected expeditions to the fur regions to the eastward. But he had received neither the employees nor the authority required for construction of a new depot, so after his

several posts were outfitted he set off with thirty-five men, mostly Iroquois, on a hunting and exploring expedition. His hopes for a major test of the new system were dashed, however, when the unruly Iroquois insisted on trading privately with the Nez Percés and finally attempted to assasinate him. He was forced to leave the rebels behind and with a few loyal men, mostly Canadians and Hawaiians, made a three-month winter journey, evidently into the region along the Snake River. A "good understanding" was reached with several tribes in the area, but beyond that the results seem not to be recorded.[55]

When the Columbia officers and clerks met at Fort George in the summer of 1818 a changed atmosphere was evident. Peremptory orders had been received from Fort William to place 100 men at McKenzie's disposal and to build a new interior headquarters. On July 11, 1818, McKenzie and his reinforcements camped at a spot he had previously selected near the junction of the Columbia and Walla Walla rivers. The bleak site offered few hopes of comfort for the men, but it possessed superb strategic advantages for the trade. The Astorians had found that the Walla Walla Valley provided a convenient access route to the interior. Also, the neighborhood was a trading ground for several Indian groups, thus facilitating the purchase of horses which were required in large quantity for travel in a region where boats and canoes were of small use. And the new post was well situated as a collection and shipping point for the fur harvests not only of the Snake

Country but of New Caledonia and of the Kootenai and Flathead regions as well. The fort was so strongly built that Alexander Ross called it "the Gibralter of the Columbia," but its official name was Fort Nez Percés.[56] It was later more commonly known as Fort Walla Walla.

McKenzie was forced to spend a number of weeks in difficult and delicate negotiations with the Cayuse and other native groups for permission to pass through their lands. Once this was obtained preparations were made for his great innovation -- a strong trapping expedition to exploit the Snake Country.[57]

As Frederick Merk has pointed out, the Snake Country was a region of "ill-defined boundaries," centered about the Snake River. In 1818 much of it was still unexplored, and its fur resources were largely a matter of speculation.[58] If the tracks of future Snake Country expeditions provide any criteria, it extended on the north to the Salmon River region, and even to the Flathead area and the Grand Tetons. On the east it spilled (illegally for the British) across the Rockies to the waters of the upper Missouri but more properly was confined by the Continental Divide and the valleys of the Green and Colorado rivers. It encompassed all of the Great Basin, and on one occasion a Snake expedition went as far south as the mouth of the Colorado. The region west of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascades was not considered part of the Snake Country, though it was traversed several times by members of Snake parties. Also, the Snake expeditions did not operate

north and west of the Columbia River. Truly, here was an empire ripe for awakening.[59]

McKenzie left Fort Nez Percés late in September, 1818, with 55 men and 195 horses. No provisions were carried, since it was intended to live off the country.[60] He advanced to the Boise River, which he called the River Skam-am-naugh.[61] Having difficulties with the still-rebellious Iroqois hunters in his party, he left them to trap beaver along the Boise. It is probable that some of these men roamed eastward at least as far as Camas Creek and lower Big Wood River during the winter.[62] He and the rest of the party went eastward and southeastward, going as far as Bear River and probably even to Green River. This region proved rich in beaver, and both trapping and trading produced abundant yields. Evidently reluctant to give up the hunt during the winter -- the season when furs were at their best -- McKenzie left his party to trap at an unnamed location -- possibly in the Great Basin -- and returned with six Canadians to Fort Nez Percés. During the homeward journey he said he traveled along the base of the Rocky Mountains and through the upper Snake Country, covering more than 600 miles of the distance on snowshoes.[63]

Despite having been exposed to hardships in the field for six months, McKenzie rested only seven days before starting back to the Snake Country. This time he and his six companions left by barge, since he wanted to test the possibility of supplying the field parties by boat navigation up the Snake River. His

experiences in the Grand Canyon of the Snake caused him to believe that the water route could be used but that it might be best "to continue the land transportation while the business in this quarter is carried on upon a small scale."[64] In any case, he was forced to send the barge back, while he and two men set out on foot to cover the remaining distance to the Boise River. The time evidently was late April, 1819.

While at Fort Nez Percés, McKenzie had arranged for a new outfit of supplies and additional men to be sent to him in the Snake Country so that the entire expedition would not have to lose valuable time journeying to headquarters and then returning to the field. Not long after his departure from Walla Walla a party of fifteen men reached that place, having been sent to reinforce the Snake brigade. Alexander Ross, the clerk in charge of the post, added twenty-six men to this number and sent them off with supplies for McKenzie. The party was commanded by William Kittson, described by Ross as "an apprentice clerk from Canada, a novice in the country, but a smart fellow."[65] After a trip marked by several clashes with Indian horse thieves, Kittson reached McKenzie on Boise River.

Promptly upon the delivery of the outfit, the fur returns from the previous winter's operations were loaded on his horses, and Kittson "bent his course" for Fort Nez Percés. Two men were lost in a battle with an Indian war party during the return journey, but he arrived with the precious cargo intact on

July 7, 1819. The exact value of this first major Snake fur harvest is not known, but Ross claimed it was large enough to give the company's western operations "a handsome surplus."[66] After Kittson delivered his furs he and his men once more made the long trip to the Boise River, where he rejoined McKenzie. The combined party, numbering about seventy-five men, then embarked on McKenzie's "second adventure into the Snake country."[67]

Though several times dangerously threatened by hostile Indians, the hunters reached Bear Lake by early September, 1819. Since the natives of this area still were little acquainted with European goods and were unversed in relative values, the North Westers were able to conduct a brisk trade for pelts, which were acquired for ridiculously low prices. But as Ross remarked, the Snakes were "not deficient in acuteness," and this happy state of affairs could not be expected to continue for long.[68]

McKenzie's exact route during the remainder of the winter hunt cannot de determined with certainty. There is some evidence that he may have visited the Grand Teton region and the sources of Green River.[69] It is known, however, that he spent a considerable period in the foothills and mountain valleys on the northern border of the Snake River Plains. On February 16, 1820, one of his men, John Day, died on the banks of the present Little Lost River.[70] Alexander Ross later noted that Thyrey Goddin, another member of the party, discovered the stream now called Big Lost River during the same year; and he also stated that

McKenzie and his party "fell on" what evidently was the present Big Wood River on his way home during the spring of 1820.[71]

McKenzie, "in his leather jacket," returned to Fort Nez Percés with his party on June 22, 1820. He brought 154 horses loaded with beaver. Among the costs of this second Snake Expedition, however, were the lives of three Hawaiians murdered by Indians while trapping and of two additional men killed on Boise River when natives attacked and burned a "couple of buildings" erected there by Kittson.[72]

Taking only twelve days to rest and refit, the indomitable McKenzie started on his third expedition to the Snake Country on July 4, 1820. With him were seventy men.[73] He remained in the field for more than a year, but nothing certain is known about his route. The great student of the fur trade, Dale Morgan, concluded that McKenzie hunted on the Green River at some time during 1820-1821.[74] He and his brigade returned to Fort Nez Percés on July 10, 1821. His returns were greater than those of the previous year, and he had not lost a man.[75] It has been estimated that the pelts from his three Snake Country expeditions amounted to "perhaps a quarter of the whole returns of the Columbia Department" for those years.[76]

By the time he began to enjoy a well-earned rest at Walla Walla a great change had taken place in the affairs of the British fur trade and in the status of McKenzie himself, although he

probably was not aware of the new situation until somewhat later. During March, 1821, the North West Company had been merged into its great rival, the Hudson's Bay Company, and McKenzie had been taken into the latter firm as a chief factor, the highest grade of "commissioned gentlemen." How much his future actions were influenced by news of these events when it arrived is not known, but instead of returning to the Snake Country he remained at Fort Nez Percés over the winter and went "out" to Fort William during the spring of 1822.[77] The Hudson's Bay Company quickly put to use his recognized ability as a conductor of trapping brigades by appointing him to head the projected Bow River expedition.[78]

The major contributions made by Donald McKenzie to the development of the western fur trade have only been fully comprehended in recent years. He was the first to understand the great fur resources of the vast region lying between the Rockies on the east and the Blue Mountains, the Cascades, and the Sierra on the west. He and his men were working the Bear River and Green River valleys several years before Jedediah Smith and other American trappers arrived on the scene. His explorations along the Snake River resulted in a number of place names which are still in use.

But even more important were the innovations he instituted to exploit this often forbidding region. Although McKenzie did not originate the roving trapping party it was, as Dale Morgan has written, left to him "to demonstrate the real potential of the

trapping brigade." Unlike the Americans east of the Rockies, he realized that only strong parties could succeed in hostile Indian country, and he was quick to see that horses could be used on a large scale to transport supplies and furs in place of the boats which had been traditional in the trade. While not entirely adverse to fixed posts, he showed that mobile parties could often produce better results in both trading and trapping. The manner in which he kept his party in the field for two successive seasons by having supplies and reinforcements sent to him instead of his returning to the depot was a forerunner of the rendezvous system which became such a prominent feature of American trade in the Far West. It is not yet clear, however, that Ashley was imitating McKenzie or that he was even aware of the precedent when he organized his first rendezvous in 1825.[79]

And perhaps most important of all for the purposes of the present discussion, the Snake Country expedition which he had founded did not cease with McKenzie's departure from the scene. As an institution it continued for more than a decade and became a weapon in the international commercial and political struggle for control of the Oregon Country.[80]

It must not be supposed that the trapping activities of the North West Company on the Pacific Slope were confined to the Snake Country. It is quite clear that the pioneering efforts made by the Astorians in the Willamette Valley, in the Cowlitz

region, and elsewhere were continued by their successors, even before the Fort William councils of 1815 and 1816 ordered a more vigorous expansion of operations "towards California and the mountains." Equally apparent, however, is the fact that these early hunts were on a small scale and conducted largely by freemen.

On February 17, 1814, Alexander Henry recorded the return to Fort George of four Iroquois who had "been up" the Cowlitz River, north of the Columbia. These men reported finding plenty of beaver but that the continual rising and falling of the river level prevented success with traps.[81] On March 25 a party arrived from the Willamette with twenty packs of beaver, "part collected by the natives and part by our men."[82] A considerable number of freemen, a portion of them former Astorians, were also working on the Willamette. The most tantalizing of Henry's remarks concerning trapping, however, is found in his journal entry for March 29, 1814: "Arrangements made with J. Day, Carson, and other freemen, on halves for Spanish river."[83] At that time "Spanish River" was the name generally given by the mountaineers to the Green or Colorado rivers, but it seems possible that in this instance it meant a real or rumored stream believed to lead to California. Unfortunately, nothing more concerning this projected expedition seems to have come to light.

By 1816 a more vigorous employment of trapping parties from Fort George was evident. In the fall of that year a brigade of

ten men was equipped to hunt on the Willamette River. As the group ascended the stream, the Indians demanded tribute for the privilege of hunting on tribal lands. When payment was refused, a battle ensued, resulting in the death of a chief. The Nor' Westers retreated to Fort George and, recorded Alexander Ross, "the project of hunting in the Wallamitte was relinquished for some time."[84]

After an appropriate interval, a stronger party of twenty-five men and a clerk was sent to reestablish friendly relations with the natives and to reach the trapping grounds. By agreeing to pay compensation for the dead chief, the quarrel with the Indians was patched up, but the hunters were soon embroiled in a second conflict. This time three Indians were killed, and the North Westers escaped only by fleeing under the cover of darkness. "By the disaster of this trip," said Ross, "every avenue was for the present shut up against our hunters in the Wallamette direction."[85]

Letting another interval pass, the North Westers sent experienced Alexander Ross at the head of forty-five men to treat once more with the Indians at Willamette Falls. This time the negotiations produced lasting results. The Indians agreed that the hunters should have free access to the Willamette Valley, and it is reported that they "faithfully and zealously observed the agreement for many years afterwards."[86]

Indeed, all went well for a while. But evidently during the fall of 1818, as shall be noted in some detail later, the

North Westers were involved in another quarrel with the natives, this time on the Cowlitz River north of the Columbia. As a result, the trapping and trading parties which operated in that region had to be diverted to the Willamette where enough trappers and hunters were already employed.[87]

Soon a large party of sixty men, in charge of two clerks, was sent to the very headwaters of the Willamette and then southwest into the basin of the Umpqua River. Operations in what appears to have been at least partly a new field started off well, and the beaver harvest was abundant. But then, just when affairs appeared most promising, unruly Iroqois hunters in the party massacred a number of inoffensive Indians. Fearing retaliation, not only the Umpqua party but all the trappers on the Willamette fled in panic to Fort George.[88]

The Northwesters were unfortunate and inept in their relations with the Indians throughout the entire Columbia region, but once more they managed to conciliate the natives of the Willamette area. It is reliably reported that one of their clerks, Thomas McKay -- tall, dark, and brave as a lion -- was sent with a party during 1820 to explore the country beyond the Willamette headwaters. "Mr. Thomis McKay is doing well with his Band on the Welihamet," wrote one Nor'Wester to another on March 2, 1821.[89]

Thus the North West Company at last found a man who could keep the southern frontier open for trapping. For even though

McKay's party had a clash with the natives, peace was restored, and the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department manager was able to write in 1843 that "a good understanding" existed between the Willamette natives and the "whites" from "that time to this."[90]

The Nor'Westers were not to have any such happy ending north of the Columbia, however. As has been seen, small parties of the company's hunters had been sent from Fort George to operate along the Cowlitz and probably elsewhere since at least late 1813. It appears to have been toward the end of 1818 or early the next year that an expedition of Iroquois Indians was dispatched to the "Cowlitz quarter" to hunt and trap. These undisciplined Eastern natives, who had been imported to the Columbia in increasing numbers as one of the 1815-1816 "reforms," ran true to form and soon began to "interfere" with the Cowlitz women. When the natives resisted, a battle broke out with the result that one Iroquois was killed and two wounded. The survivors abandoned their hunting ground and beat a hasty retreat to Fort George.

Not understanding that his own hunters were the aggressors, James Keith sent about fifty men, mostly Iroquois, to punish the "murderers." Before the clerk in charge could open negotiations with the natives, the Iroquois disobeyed orders and slaughtered twelve unsuspecting men, women, and children. Once more the North Westers had to retreat to Fort George.[91]

Keith tried to mend matters early in 1819 by arranging a marriage between one of his clerks and the daughter of the Cowlitz

chief, but another unfortunate incident, in which the Cowlitz delegation was attacked at Fort George by the Chinooks, ended all possibility of reconciliation.[92] From that time the North Westers largely ceased to send trappers north of the lower Columbia "as the Cowlitz could not be depended upon."[93]

Farther upstream, however, there were at least spasmodic attempts to trap in the vast region north and west of the river. Evidently somewhat after the Cowlitz debacle Alexander Ross, then in charge of Fort Nez Percés, sent a party of trappers from there towards the Yakima River. The men had not gone far before they were "frightened" by hostile natives and retreated to their base. "They were nevertheless," wrote Ross, "considering the short time they had been there very successful."[94]

There seems to be no evidence that such a venture was ever repeated. But sometime about 1820 or early 1821 Peter Skene Ogden, in charge of Kamloops Post on the Thompson River in present British Columbia, is said to have sent a band of freemen up a northern branch of that stream. They returned after having gone only forty miles due to dissension in their ranks.[95]

Such ventures seem to indicate that by the end of their sway on the Columbia the North Westers were employing trapping parties wherever prospects appeared promising as an almost routine instrument for increasing the returns of the department. A great change had taken place in the Columbia fur trade since 1813.

The Hudson's Bay Company takes the helm

After the merger of the North West Company into the Hudson's Bay Company early in 1821, the surviving firm looked forward to operating the trade in the Columbia Department with much hesitation. The business there had for several years been a losing proposition under the Nor'Westers.[96] The Hudson's Bay Company's directors, the Governor and Committee in London, knew little about conditions west of the Rockies except what was revealed by the account books. In February, 1822, they told George Simpson, their chief officer in America, that they were "not sanguine" in their expectations of profits from the Columbia but if losses could be reduced considerably it might be desirable to hold the region as a buffer to keep rival traders from from the richer New Caledonia to the north. Simpson was instructed to gather all possible information concerning the region and, if the results were too discouraging, to consider whether the firm should withdraw northward.[97]

The next several years, therefore, were marked by a lull in, but not a complete discontinuation of, trapping expeditions while the Company assessed its position on the Columbia and reorganized its operations. Some of the earliest information received from new personnel sent to the Pacific Slope related to the possibilities for an expansion of trapping activities.

Early in April, 1822, Chief Trader John Lee Lewes wrote to Governor Simpson from Fort George painting an optimistic picture of the prospects. "Immence tracks of Land to the North of Fort

George remain still unexplored, abounding as I am given to understand with Beaver," he announced. He also called Simpson's attention to the Snake Country, which also offered opportunities for further exploitation.[98] A year later Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy reported from Spokane House that the Snake Country was "the Source from which we draw the Major part of our Returns" despite the fact that the freemen were "so indolent and careless, that often after they have been at the trouble of procuring Furs at the risk of their Lives, they are too lazy to come in with them and the Consequence is that their Furs are either lost or damaged before they reach this place."[99] Soon after this letter was written, word reached Governor Simpson at Norway House that Chief Factor John Dugald Cameron at Fort George had made "repeated attempts to extend the trade "along the Coast to the Northward, a tract ascertained to abound in Furs, but without success on account of the implacable revenge of the natives for a supposed outrage committed on them by the Whites some years ago."[100]

Such reports, along with others concerning both additional commercial and the political aspects of the Columbia trade, soon convinced the Governor and Committee that retreat would be unwise. By early 1824 it was clear to the directors that rival national claims to the Oregon Country would for years not prevent the Company from operating north toward Russian Alaska or south and east of the Columbia.[101] The directors now turned their thoughts to getting the most from the region. For example, on March 12,

1824, they told Governor Simpson: "we think the trade should be extended in the Snake Country, and also along the Coast to the Northward."[102]

Vigorous new programs did not effectively get under way, however, until dynamic, hard-driving Governor Simpson visited the Columbia late in 1824. By the time he returned east the next spring the district had been thoroughly reorganized, and measures had been initiated to push operations on land and sea to an extent never achieved by the North Westers. While most of Governor Simpson's reforms, such as the drastic reduction in the number of employees west of the mountains and the great emphasis on making the district self-sufficient in food, at least indirectly influenced future trapping activities, only those with an immediate bearing on our subject can be noted here.

There is no evidence that Governor Simpson ever questioned the need for large-scale trapping by Europeans in the Columbia region, but if he had any doubts they quickly vanished. He learned for himself what the Astorians and the Nor'Westers had long since discovered -- that many of the native groups west of the Rockies were not enthusiastic or efficient beaver hunters. While descending the Columbia during October, 1824, he observed that the Indians about Kettle Falls were "perfectly independent of us for any necessary," contenting themselves with gathering a "few Skins" annually to purchase "the triffling articles of British Manufacture they require," largely arms and tobacco.[103]

Farther downstream, at Fort Nez Percés, he learned that trade with the local Cayuse and other tribes netted only about 2000 beaver pelts annually. "It does not appear to me," he wrote in his journal, "that there is a prospect of any considerable increase unless trappers are introduced as the Indians cannot be prevailed on to exert themselves in hunting."[104]

The Governor found the same "indolent and lazy" habits to prevail among most of the lower Columbia tribes. Having little need of the Company's goods, they "merely" took "the trouble of looking after a few Beaver (which is considered a wonderful exertion) to supply themselves with Tobacco Beads Guns and Ammunition."[105] Simpson was particularly disgusted with the powerful Chinooks who lived at the mouth of the Columbia. They were, he said, "a Nation of Traders and not Hunters."[106] He complained that they could not "be roused into habits of activity," meaning that they would not hunt for furs to trade to the Company.[107]

But the desire to increase fur returns was not Simpson's only reason for wishing to expand trapping operations. During his visit to the Columbia he was horrified to note the large cost of the superfluous employees at several posts, particularly Fort George: and he was determined that these men should be put usefully to work until they could be shipped back across the mountains or, if retained, during periods when their services were not urgently required for manning boats or other duties.[108]

The freemen who hung about Flathead Post and a few other stations were another thorn in the Company's side.[109] The "Little Emperor" was anxious to get them also off on trapping expeditions.

Perhaps to most urgent motive, however, was the desire to thwart the Americans both economically and politically in the Oregon Country. Under the Convention of 1818 the entire region was open to trade and settlement by both the United States and Great Britain, but by early 1824 it was evident that the most Britain could hope for when a final boundary was drawn was to retain the area north and west of the Columbia River. The southern and eastern portion (at least south of 49°) was sure to fall to the United States eventually. British and Company policy, therefore, was to protect and strengthen their position north of the Columbia and to delay as long as possible the advance of the Americans into the rest of Oregon. The Company was the chief agent for implementing this policy.

As early as 1822 Governor Simpson had anticipated that American trappers based on St. Louis would invade the Snake Country.[110] He was also keen enough to see that these fur hunters would open the way for settlers. Thus competition in the Snake Country would not only decrease profits from that region but would bring Americans within striking distance of the area the Company most wished to protect.

Simpson's counter measure, and that of the London directors

as well, was a determination to trap the region south and east of the Columbia to the exhaustion of its fur resources while that area was still open to the British. Maximizing profits was a consideration in reaching this decision, but the impelling motive was the desire to make this vast area so unproductive for the Americans that they would not cross it. In short, a "scorched earth" policy was to be carried out in order to create a buffer against commercial competition which would surely lead to political rivalry north of the river.[111] Simpson also saw that increased yields from south of the Columbia would permit him to institute conservation measures in the over-trapped regions east of the mountains.[112]

For all of these reasons, Simpson appears to have developed a considerable enthusiasm for trapping expeditions. At one point during his visit he expressed his conviction that staffs of posts should be reduced and that some stations should even be abandoned, "as we can turn the Services of our officers & men to better account in many other parts of the Country even by outfitting them as trappers."[113]

Simpson wasted no time in giving effect to his convictions. As shall be seen later in some detail, he reorganized the Snake Country expeditions during his journey down the Columbia and placed them under the charge of a strong leader. At Fort George he directed that a large expedition of supernumerary employees and freemen be sent on a year-long trapping expedition up the

Willamette Valley, across to the Umpqua, and thence "to the Banks of the Rio Colorado."[114] He also planned to send a second expedition southward from Fort George in the summer of 1825, composed of the crews of the boat brigades from the interior.[115]

Turning his attention to the situation north of the river, he was shocked to learn that due to native hostility the firm's employees at Fort George considered it "the height of insanity" to attempt to send trappers in that direction.[116] Simpson determined to test this belief. Only eleven days after his arrival at Fort George he sent a strong party under Chief Trader James McMillan to explore northward as far as Fraser River. When the expedition returned with reports that the country "abounded" in beaver and that the Indians were friendly, the way had been opened for hunting in the Cowlitz region and beyond.[117] On his way back up the Columbia during April, 1825, Simpson was impressed with the "large quantities of Beaver Cuttings" observed on the upper reaches beyond Kettle Falls. "I . . . am satisfied," he noted in his journal, "that if a party of 20 good Trappers would pass a year in this neighborhood and employ their time well they would make good hunts."[118]

Simpson thus contemplated or actually set in motion trapping expeditions over a broad range of the Columbia District. In a review such as this it is impossible to follow the course of every Company hunting party which roamed over this vast district during the course of the next thirty years. Only the general

outline can be noted, with emphasis on the two main expeditions -- the Snake Brigade and the Southern Brigade.

The remainder of the paper will be divided into sections as follows: (1) the Snake Country expeditions; (2) the Southern parties; (3) miscellaneous trapping activities; and (4) the organization, operating techniques, and personnel of the typical British fur brigade. In the first two of these sections an attempt will be made to list the principal expeditions with a summary of the route and accomplishments of each. No secondary account, however, can have the impact and interest of an original eye-witness narrative. Thus wherever possible references will be given to the printed journals of the most important expeditions so that readers may gain the appreciation of the hardships and perils experienced by the trappers and achieve an understanding of the daily routine which can come only from reading the primary sources.

The Snake Expeditions under the Hudson's Bay Company

After the return of Donald McKenzie to Fort Nez Percés in July, 1821, and following the merger of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company during that same year, there was, as Paul Phillips has pointed out, "a pause in the fur trade of the interior."[119] In fact McKenzie's old foe on the Columbia, James Keith, described the Snake Country as "lately abandonded" in a letter to the new firm's London directors on February 22, 1822.

He considered this branch of the trade as "too casual & contingent to be relied on," seemingly recommending that it be given up except for one more "communication" with that region.[120] This probably not unprejudiced advice may have been at least partly responsible for the fact that the Hudson's Bay Company gave little attention to the Snake Country for a year or two after the coalition, but the firm's Governor and Committee were generally pessimistic over the prospects of the entire Columbia trade and few forward steps were taken anywhere in the district while its possibilities were being investigated.[121]

But even though activity in the Snake Country slowed after mid 1821 it did not cease entirely. As Dale Morgan has pointed out, "the trappers who had composed the Snake brigade went right on eating, and if they were not out hunting beaver, they ate horseflesh and still more expensive fare at the Company's posts on credit."[122] Trapping in the Snake Country had proved to be an extremely hazardous and unpleasant occupation, and no Company officer came forward to take McKenzie's place. Yet the cost of the idle hunters could no longer be tolerated, so in the spring of 1822 a party of Iroquois and other freemen was sent out to the Snake Country under the command of Michel Bourdon, a steady and experienced young man who had been with McKenzie in 1818-1819.[123]

Bourdon's party did not leave from Fort Nez Percés as had past Snake expeditions beginning in 1818. Evidently it took its

departure from Flathead Post, a small station on Clarks Fork of the Columbia near Thompson Falls in the present Montana. Flathead was a subpost of Spokane House, and therefore the latter post became the "headquarters" of the Snake Country expeditions for the next several years.

The reasons for this shift in the brigade's base are not clear. Flathead was much farther from the Snake Country than Walla Walla, although it did offer an easier route to the less heavily trapped eastern reaches of the region and to the upper Missouri area which, though United States territory and thus not legally open to British traders, was a rich beaver ground and provided the only practicable road southward to the Snake. In addition, it appears that parties of freemen had been operating annually from Flathead Post for some years.[124]

Little is known about Bourdon's expedition, but presumably he crossed and then recrossed the Continental Divide to reach Henry's Fork, the main Snake River, the Blackfoot River, and Bear Lake. The journey was marked by several clashes with those scourges of the Snake Country, the Blackfeet. Two men were killed during these skirmishes, and Bourdon lost fourteen more through desertion. The survivors made their way back to Spokane House, where they arrived on September 13, 1822. The trappers had collected 2200 beaver pelts, but 700 of the skins remained in the Snake Country.[125]

While Bourdon was in the field, the Council for the Northern Department, meeting at York Factory on Hudson Bay during June, 1822, turned its attention to the Snake Country. Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy was appointed to the Columbia District and ordered to take up his winter residence at Spokane House. He was "impowered" to hire Michel Bourdon as a "Conductor of Trappers" at the "lowest rate for which he may agree."[126]

When Kennedy reached Spokane House that fall he found that the situation required stronger measures than the council had contemplated. "The Snake Country," he reported to Governor Simpson, "is the Source from which we draw the Major part of our Return," and thus operations there should no longer be left largely in the hands of the unreliable freemen. In addition, he was anxious to recover the 700 skins Bourdon had left behind, evidently en cache at a place called Fort Providence. What was more, a party of freemen and their families had crossed the mountains to Spokane House from the Saskatchewan and was passing the winter in idleness at Flathead Post. Kennedy was anxious to get these people off his hands and profitably employed so they could pay their debts to the Company.[127]

Kennedy therefore placed veteran clerk Finan McDonald in charge of an expedition which was to leave Flathead Post in the spring of 1823. He was to be accompanied by five engagés (Company employees) as well as by Michel Bourdon and at least forty-five freemen. Some of the freemen were to bring in the

furs at Fort Providence and then return to their companions with supplies so that the expedition could remain in the field through the winter, the season when beaver pelts were at their prime. McKenzie's innovation had not been forgotten. McDonald himself, however, was to return during the fall of 1823 to take charge of Flathead Post for the winter and to bring in the furs collected during the summer.

McDonald seems to have left no journal of his 1823 expedition, so his exact route cannot be traced with certainty.[128] Undoubtedly the party took the traditional route from Flathead southeastward to the site of the present Missoula. From there McDonald probably ascended Clarks Fork and continued on to the Big Hole, where one of the men, a mixed-blood named Thomas Anderson, was killed during a parley with the Piegans.[129] Crossing to the Beaverhead and then traversing Lemhi Pass westward across the Continental Divide, the trappers fell into a Blackfoot ambush soon after beginning their descent to the Lemhi River.

Instead of retreating, McDonald and his companions laid siege to the thicket where the Indians were hidden and finally set it on fire. Of seventy-five Blackfeet only seven escaped, and as McDonald later wrote, the survivors "had not a Britch Clout to Cover them selves."[130] The trappers lost six of their number, including "Poore" Michel Bourdon. Four years later Peter Skene Ogden still regretted the loss of this "most valuable" employee who was even then unequaled in the Columbia for his experience

with trappers, knowledge of Indians, and acquaintance with the Snake Country.[131]

In the words of McDonald, this encounter did indeed show the bloodthirsty Blackfeet "what war was."[132] As Dale Morgan has pointed out, this was the only large-scale pitched battle the Hudson's Bay Company ever was required to fight in the Snake Country. For several years Blackfeet war parties ranging the region refrained from attacks on both British and American trappers except when murders of small groups could be accomplished without danger.[133]

After crossing to the western side of the Continental Divide McDonald went south to the Snake River and then on to Bear River. Ascending the latter stream, he went east into the Green River Valley. From there he turned northward and once more crossed the divide to the upper waters of the Missouri. He followed that stream down to Great Falls, thus going farther east on American soil than any other British Snake Country expedition.

McDonald probably returned to Flathead Post, but if so he soon moved to Spokane House, where Alexander Ross found him and "all" his men late in October, 1823.[134] Evidently the plan to leave the free hunters out all winter had been abandoned. McDonald's returns amounted to 4339 beaver. Dale Morgan believed this was "perhaps the best hunt" that had ever been made in the Snake Country.[135] But McDonald, courageous giant that he was, had had enough of the region. "I got Safe home from the Snake Cuntre,"

he wrote to a friend, "and when that Cuntre will see me agane the Beaver will have Gould Skin."[136]

It must have been with considerable relief, then, that he received the news brought in by the Company's fall express from the East. On advice received from the chief factors on the Columbia, Governor Simpson had decided meanwhile that the Snake expedition should be placed on a more regular footing. During July, 1823, he arranged for the Council of the Northern Department to appoint a vigorous and highly competent former Nor'Wester, Chief Trader Peter Skene Ogden, to the command of the Spokane House District. Ogden was instructed to send an expedition to the Snake Country in the spring of 1824 under the charge of Clerk Alexander Ross. Eight additional employees were to be supplied to strengthen the party.[137]

If the news of these appointments pleased McDonald, it was not welcomed by Ross. He had come to the Columbia with the first Astorians, and most of his inland experience had been at the bleak and uncomfortable posts of Fort Okanogan and Nez Percés. In the fall of 1823 his term of employment with the Hudson's Bay Company was at an end, and he was happily in the process of moving himself and his family eastward across the Rockies when he received Simpson's letter offering him the management of the Snake Expedition for three years at a salary of £120 per year.[138] With some reluctance he accepted.

Ross had never been to the Snake Country, but he had been in charge of Fort Nez Percés during the period of McKenzie's expeditions and thus had a good, if secondhand, knowledge of the region. In the spring of 1823 he had sent Simpson a "statement" concerning the trade there, and undoubtedly this plus the recommendations of several officers who had served with him on the Columbia were responsible for his selection. And in truth he was a conscientious and able employee, but he took over his command under three major handicaps. First, he was disgruntled that the journey was to begin from Flathead Post and not from Fort Nez Percés as he had expected and as he believed was proper.[139] Second, by the time he reached his main hunting grounds American trappers had entered the area. This competition spelled trouble on several counts, not the least of which was that anticipated by Governor Simpson when he instructed Ross's superiors during July, 1823, to warn him "against opening a road for the Americans" into the Company's main trading areas.[140] Third, nearly three-fifths of his party consisted of Indians, and half of those were the notoriously fickle and disaffected Iroquois and other Eastern natives.[141] Under the circumstances a much stronger man than Ross might well have failed to achieve all that was expected of him.

Ross left Flathead House on February 10, 1824. His force, when completely assembled later that day at nearby Horse Plains, numbered eleven <u>engagés</u> and forty-three freemen, giving a total force, including himself, of fifty-five men. He viewed his companions with some misgivings. "There are many of these people too old for

a long Voyage," he noted in his journal. Of the seventeen French Canadians, five were over sixty years old, and two were over seventy. He admitted that the twelve Iroquois were in general good hunters, but he considered them faithless conspirators, "always at variance with the whites . . . too fond of Indians and of trafficking away their property with the Natives." The nineteen non-Iroquis Indians were, he believed, only of use in caring for the horses. Thus he did not expect to have more than twenty trappers available at any time. In addition to the men, the party included twenty-five women and sixty-four children. The equipment included seventy-five guns, a brass three-pounder, 212 beaver traps, 392 horses, plus a good supply of ammunition and a moderate stock of trade goods.[142]

Ross took the usual route of the Flathead hunters to the site of the present Missoula, and then he moved southward up the Bitterroot River to a "small mountain prairie" still known as Ross's Hole. Here he was snowbound for a month, but eventually he was able to beat a way through the snow over Gibbon Pass to the Big Hole region. Using the route of Bourdon and McDonald over Lemhi Pass he descended into the Salmon River drainage of the present Idaho. Here, on the Lemhi River, he decided not to continue in the tracks of his predecessors but to make for the southern Snake country by a route "virtually unknown to the whites" where, as he said, the mountains were "lofty and abrupt."[143] Descending to the main Salmon River, he made camp at a place he called

"Canoe Point" -- perhaps at the present Salmon City but probably at the junction of the Salmon and Pahsimeroi Rivers.

After scouting parties in the directions of Little Lost River and the Boise River reported finding few beaver, Ross decided to follow the advice of a Snake Indian slave who was a member of the expedition. A great deal of effort and much time was lost beating about the rugged Salmon River Mountains north and west of the present Challis until the trappers were convinced they had been deceived. The slave barely escaped with his life.[144]

Disgusted with prospects to the west, Ross turned southward to the Lost River country where McKenzie had met success in 1819 and 1820. Blackfoot war parties caused several alarms and one disagreeable incident in which two trappers were robbed of their horses and all their equipment, but there were no major clashes. The Iroquois under Ross's command evidently believed that the thrashing McDonald had given the Piegans would assure the safety of a relatively small party, for they badgered Ross for permission to go off on a hunt by themselves. They believed they could take more beaver by not remaining with the large main brigade. Ross reluctantly agreed on June 11, and twelve men led by the famous fur-trade character, "Old Pierre" Tevanitagon, were detached the next day to hunt on Henrys Fork, in Pierre's Hole (named for Tevanitagon and now known as Teton Valley) near the Grand Tetons, and then south along the Snake, Blackfoot, and Portneuf Rivers.

The Iroquois were to rejoin the main party at "the fork" or near the Three Buttes, on September 25.[145]

After parting from the Iroquois Ross ascended Big Lost River to its head and crossed the divide westward to Big Wood River at the present Ketchum. Thus he apparently was the discoverer of the Trail Creek route to Sun Valley.[146] Beaver were abundant in this virgin hunting ground, and his men worked down the stream until the fluctuating height of the water made trapping unprofitable. Then Ross went west by way of Camas Creek and the Boise River as far as the Payette and Weiser Rivers. This long western swing proved highly successful, producing 1855 beaver pelts.[147]

On his return journey to rendezvous with his Iroquois, Ross trapped along Big Wood River again, this time to its source, and on September 18 crossed the ridge at or near the present Galena Summit. While on the divide he climbed a neighboring peak which he named "Mount Simpson." From it he had a splendid view of the Sawtooth Range. After descending the north side of the ridge he reached the main Salmon River, probably by following the East Fork but possibly by way of Sawtooth Valley and Stanley Basin (Ross's rather vague geographical descriptions have given rise to differences of opinion among authorities). Then, with much hardship due to steep canyon walls, he descended Salmon River to "Canoe Camp." Scouts were sent southward to find the Iroquois while the main

party moved on -- either to the Lemhi Valley or to the open region about the Pahsimeroi and Little Lost Rivers -- to trap and to gather buffalo meat for the homeward journey.[148]

On October 14 one of the scouting parties returned bringing with them the long-absent Iroqois. Ross was dismayed. The eastern natives were, in his words, "trapless and beaverless, naked and destitute of almost everything."[149] South of the Snake Old Pierre and his companions had, they said, gotten into a quarrel with a band of Snake Indians over a woman and a horse. The Snakes "fell on" them and robbed them of 900 beaver, 54 traps, 5 guns, 27 horses, and most of their clothing. Ross blamed this disaster on the Iroqois, claiming they had "passed the time with the Indians and neglected their hunts" ever since they had left the main party.[150] But as Dale Morgan has pointed out, Ross himself probably was the real cause of the incident, since a dispute he had with the Snakes while he was in the western reaches of the country so enraged the Indians that they took vengeance on the first small band of trappers they encountered.[151]

In the long run the important result of this affair for the Hudson's Bay men was not the loss of the pelts upon which Ross had counted to make his expedition an outstanding success but the fact that the Iroquois brought into camp with them seven American trappers under the command of Jedediah Smith. Smith was the Ashley and Henry employee who earlier that year had made the

effective discovery of South Pass and had opened for the Americans the rich beaver grounds of the Green River Valley. After taking his returns back east across South Pass and sending them on their way to St. Louis, he had once more crossed the Continental Divide with the intention of making a fall hunt as far as the waters of the Columbia. He was engaged in this project when he came across Ross's destitute Iroqois near the present Blackfoot, Idaho.[152] The British trappers begged the Americans to protect them and escort them to the rendezvous point. For this service and, evidently, for horse hire, ammunition, and a few gewgaws, the Iroqois traded all 105 beaver pelts they had managed to keep from the Snakes.[153]

Ross was shocked by the presence of the Americans. He at once grasped the significance of the event -- the British no longer had a monopoly over the interior fur trade of the Far West. He suspected that at least some of Bourdon's deserters in 1822 had reached American posts in the upper Missouri drainage with "much fur" and that Smith and his men were "spies" sent to encourage more desertions and to assess the resources of the region. And, indeed, word of the prices paid by the Americans for beaver skins immediately had "a very great influence" upon Ross's hunters. Smith told Ross that many more Americans would swarm into the Snake Country the next year -- a disquieting thought indeed. But Ross's greatest concern at the moment must have been aroused when Smith announced that he and his men would

follow the Hudson's Bay party back to Flathead Post. Ross realized that permitting such an action would place him in direct violation of Simpson's order not to open a road for the Americans. But there was little he could do. After all, citizens of the United States were free to roam and hunt wherever they wished in the Oregon Country.[154]

Two days later, on October 16, Ross rushed off an express to Ogden at Spokane House, and at about the same time the combined parties set out for Flathead. Crossing either Lemhi Pass or nearby Bannock Pass -- once again historians differ -- on October 28 and Gibbon Pass on November 1, the caravan followed down the Bitterroot and returned by the regular route to Flathead Post, where it arrived on November 26, 1824.[155]

Ross was quite pleased with his results. He had brought back nearly 5000 beaver pelts, 561 more than McDonald had harvested the previous year. This yield, he boasted, was "the most profitable ever brought from the Snake country in one year." What was more, he had avoided major battles with the Blackfeet, and his loss of horses was moderate.[156]

It must have been a considerable blow, therefore, when on November 27 Peter Skene Ogden, who had arrived at Flathead Post the day before from Spokane House, handed him a note from Governor Simpson relieving him from the command of the Snake Expedition and directing him to take charge of Flathead Post for the winter and then to return East in the spring to manage the school at

Red River. With his usual tact or perhaps duplicity, however, Simpson accomplished this "kick upstairs" without alienating Ross's friendship.[157]

Simpson's motives in relieving Ross are still somewhat obscure. The Council for the Northern Department had reappointed him to the Snake Country in July, 1824.[158] But upon Simpson's arrival at Spokane House on October 28 during his inspection tour of the Columbia District he very quickly decided that Ross was a "self sufficient empty headed man" who had not the "talent" to provide the "very superior management" required to control the freemen of the Snake Brigade. By that time Ross's express of October 16 from north of the Snake Plain may have reached Spokane, since Simpson knew from Ross by at least October 30 that the expedition's returns amounted to more than 4000 beaver.[159] Although the governor admitted that these results were "respectable" and must have been pleased that no men and few horses were lost to the Balckfeet, he seized upon the fact that Ross's reports were "so full of bombast and marvellous nonsense that it is impossible to get any information that can be depended on from him."[160] Whether Simpson knew at that time that Smith and his Americans were to accompany Ross to Flathead is still undetermined. If Simpson did know, the relief of Ross undoubtedly would have followed no matter how well the clerk had performed or how clear his reports.

Probably the primary reason for the change of command,

however, came from information the governor had gathered from his chief factors and chief traders who had served in the Columbia. By the time he had been at Spokane for a day or two he had determined that the Snake Country could yield "handsome profits" if properly managed, and he had realized that the region was one "which for political reasons we should endeavor to destroy as fast as possible." In other words, he had formulated his "fur desert" policy.[161] To carry it out he needed a stronger man than Ross. He wanted a "Commissioned Gentleman" of courage, determination, and experience who could command the respect of his unruly crew.

Simpson did not have to look far to find such a man. Chief Trader Peter Skene Ogden was immediately at hand. He was a former North West Company partner who had demonstrated his toughness and efficiency in the long struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company prior to 1821. Ogden probably was not pleased when Simpson offered him, on the spot, "the most hazardous and disagreeable office in the Indian Country," but he was in no position to refuse, since the governor had been largely responsible for getting him into the Company after the coalition.

Ogden was directed to go at once to Flathead Post, to meet Ross's incoming party, to re-outfit it, and to proceed promptly "direct for the heart of the Snake country towards the Banks of the Spanish River or Rio Colorado pass the Winter & Spring there and hunt their way out by the Umpqua and Wilhamet Rivers to Fort George next summer sufficiently early to send the returns home

by the Ship." Simpson had decided that the usual practice of the Flathead freemen of remaining idle at Flathead Post during the winter meant that furs were not gathered when in their prime and also was costly in increased debts for food, ammunition, and horses consumed while the men lazed about. Ogden was also permitted to increase his party by fifteen Company employees and thirty to forty additional horses.[162]

Another idea Simpson developed for the Snake Expedition at this time proved not to be practicable. He rejected suggestions, probably eminating from Ross, that the Snake Brigade should be based on Fort Nez Percés as formerly. He admitted that the distance to the interior would be shorter from that post, but he was afraid that the powerful Nez Percé Indians would eventually cause trouble if disturbed by the comings and goings of the trappers. Instead, he proposed to outfit the expeditions from Fort George -- a pipe dream which experience soon dispelled.[163]

Ogden arrived at Flathead Post with the Snake Expedition outfit on November 26, 1824. Ross's party came in later that same day, and refitting was soon under way. On December 11 Clerk William Kittson joined the expedition from Kootenai House as second in command. He was an experienced Snake Country hand, having been with McKenzie in 1819-1820. All was ready by December 20, and on that day the party left Flathead to start, in the words of Kittson who knew whereof he spoke, "our long and dangerous journey."[164]

Ogden's first Snake Expedition, Ross noted in the Flathead journal, was "the most formidable party that has ever set out for the Snakes."[165] Contemporary figures differ somewhat, thus making an exact estimate difficult, but it appears that the brigade consisted of the two "gentlemen" leaders, eleven engagés or Company employees, forty-six freemen, thirty women, and thirty-five children, a number which was increased by at least two infants born during the journey. The party was equipped with 61 guns, 268 horses, and 352 traps.[166] Tagging along at some distance to the rear were Jedediah Smith and his six Americans who were permitted to associate with the expedition for their own protection while traversing the region of greatest danger from the Blackfeet, although Ogden was not pleased to have this competition dogging his heels and taking in all the details of the British trade. Nevertheless, he expected to take a record 14,000 beaver before he reached Fort George.[167]

The route was that of previous expeditions from Flathead: via Hells Gate near the present Missoula, up the Bitterroot, and over Gibbon Pass to the Big Hole country. Ogden's qualities of leadership were well demonstrated by his future career with the Company, but in 1824 he was inexperienced in the ways of the Snake Country freemen. By the time he reached the Big Hole he had a good idea of what he was up against. From very early in the trip the freemen had shown a reluctance to guard the horses, either the Company's or their own.[168] Whenever chance offered, they

traded away their ammunition to the Indians and lost crucial supplies on horse races with the natives. Before he had been on the trail a week, Ogden had learned to call them "thoughtless wretches."[169] While still in the Big Hole region the freemen, despite the poor condition of their horses, could not resist the temptation to charge after a herd of buffalo. Thirty of the mighty beasts were killed, but only the meat of three was brought into camp. Ogden was disgusted by this "Sinful waste" of food and ammunition. A few days later twenty-six of the freemen's horses, left unguarded, were run off by Indians. Only nine were recovered. The men were somewhat chastened by this experience, since some of them had to walk as a result, but Ogden's hope that they had learned a lesson was short lived.[170]

These same types of difficulties had plagued the Snake expeditions since their onset. Party leaders and Company officers for years had blamed the troubles on the irresponsible and dissolute natures of the freemen. "There cannot be a better test for knowing the worthless and bad character in this country than his wishing to become a freeman; it is a true sign of depravity," wrote Alexander Ross.[171] Governor Simpson was even more scathing. The Snake Expedition freemen he said in 1824 were "the very scum of the country and generally outcasts from the Service for misconduct" and constituted "the most unruly and troublesome gang to deal with in this or perhaps any other part of the World."[172]

Ogden fully seconded these views at the outset of his first expedition.

But there was much more to the matter than mere perverseness. Freemen earned their living by selling, or rather bartering, their furs they trapped to the traders. Under both the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company the prices paid for furs were not much higher than those given to Indians. Before the hunters could leave for the wilds, however, they had to equip themselves with horses, traps, ammunition, and a few other necessities, to say nothing of trinkets for native women. Then there was the food and liquor consumed at the fur posts between journeys. For this equipment and supplies the freemen were charged high prices, though not necessarily exhorbitant prices in view of the great cost of transporting the goods to the frontiers. As a result, the freemen were almost perpetually in debt. If anything, the situation had grown worse after the coalition, since Simpson was obsessed with the goal of increasing profits and set prices accordingly.[173] As long as the British maintained a monopoly over the interior fur trade, the freemen could expect little improvement in their lot.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that the freemen felt little loyalty to the Company and that they would rather hunt buffalo and chase after Indian girls than perform such unpleasant tasks as guarding horses and beating tracks through deep snow. These wilderness wanderers generally took

their debts lightly and felt little compuction about breaking away to join friendly natives to hunt on their own. After all, they had little to lose.

With the appearance of American traders and trappers in the Snake Country, the freemen glimpsed an opportunity to improve their lot. The Yankees were paying much more for beaver than the British. The Company's field officers were quick to grasp the danger. After Jedediah Smith's band joined his party in the fall of 1824, Alexander Ross noted in his journal: "The report of these men on the price of beaver [at American posts] has a very great influence on our trappers."[174] Ogden's freemen thus had an added motive for their recalcitrance, and he was not long in suffering the consequences.

On February 11, 1825, the expedition and its American followers crossed Lemhi Pass and descended to the Lemhi River, a tributary of the westward flowing Salmon. Buffalo were plentiful along the Lemhi, but the grass was soon exhausted, and the horses grew weak. Ogden wished to continue southward to the Snake River, but deep snow on the intervening divide and the condition of the horses held him in the Lemhi region for more than a month. The beaver here had been almost exhausted by Ross's hunters the year before, and the freemen were discontented as a result. Pleading the poor condition of their horses, they refused to agree to Ogden's proposal to move to the Snake by Ross's route of 1824.[175]

Finally, on March 19, the seven Americans left camp for an

attempt to reach the Snake. Evidently Ogden feared these rivals would skim the cream from the pool of beaver if they worked the hunting grounds first, so on March 23, after a scouting party had reported the way southward to be practicable, he once more got the expedition in motion even though to do so might mean the "sacrifice of the horses." Traveling by way of Little Lost River and then across the Great Snake Plain, Snake River was reached on April 6.[176]

Here the British came up with Jedediah Smith's men who, as Ogden had apprehended, had found good beaver hunting. But the Americans were out of supplies and were forced to trade one hundred pelts to Ogden at the high freemen's prices. This need of American trappers, particularly those in small parties, to fall back upon the Hudson's Bay Company for ammunition and other goods was to be repeated a number of times in future years and was one reason for the eventual British domination of the trade.

While Ogden was still on the Snake Blood Indians attacked a detached party of his hunters and killed one man, Antoine Benoit. After burying their fallen companion "in a beaver dam," the expedition ascended the Blackfoot River, which flows northward into the Snake.[177] The Americans took the same route, and for the next few days the two parties played a game of leapfrog, each attempting to keep ahead in order to harvest the most furs. Due to heavy snow, Ogden crossed to the Portneuf River and then made his way southward to the great bend of the Bear River.

En route the Blackfeet made away with twenty horses. One was recovered, but the loss was still a disaster. The freemen were thoroughly discouraged and announced their intention of abandoning the hunt. It took all of Ogden's powers of persuasion and command to prevent the disintegration of his party.

On Bear River Ogden parted from Smith, the Americans going upstream while he turned downstream into a region never before trapped by the British. A group of Snakes encountered on May 4 informed him that a party of twenty-five Americans was ahead of him -- bad news indeed. "If this be true," Ogden wrote in his journal, "it will be a fatal blow to our expectations."[178] The prophecy was only too true but for a different reason than Ogden, who had been thinking of the loss of beaver pelts, had anticipated.

The British were then in Cache Valley, and they continued southward to the present Ogden Valley. Trapping was excellent in this region east of Great Salt Lake where they were the pioneer hunters. Some of the men glimpsed the lake from a distance, but Ogden did not see it personally in 1825. In any case, this inland sea had already been discovered by American trappers, perhaps by Jim Bridger.

Ogden's brief interlude of happy hunting and high returns came to an end on May 22 when one of his trappers came into camp accompanied by two men who had deserted from Bourdon's party in 1822. They said they were among the survivors of a group which had been outfitted by Missouri and New Mexico traders. Two,

Taos, they said, was only a fifteen-day march away. Ogden gained the impression that the whole country was "overrun" with Americans and Canadians. Later that day he moved his camp a few miles south to the Weber River Valley, near the present Mountain Green, Utah.[179] This was the southernmost point reached by Ogden's first expedition.

Early the next day the two deserters returned, bringing with them the remainder of their party, which was commanded by Etienne Provost. This group was soon joined by another, which advanced toward the camp with the United States flag flying. Much to Ogden's surprise, fourteen of his own men who had been out hunting were in the company. The rest were twenty-five Americans headed by Johnson Gardner. The Americans wasted no time in informing Ogden's men that they were on United States soil and therefore, "indebted or engaged," were all free of any obligations to the Hudson's Bay Company. They offered to buy all furs offered at $3.50 a pound, about eight times the Company's rate. What was more, they agreed to sell goods "cheap in proportion."[180]

The next morning Gardner came to Ogden's lodge and declared that the region had been ceded to the United States and that since the British had no license to trap or trade they must leave or they would be driven out by military force. Ogden replied, quite correctly, that the boundary question had not been settled and that he would withdraw when he received orders from his own government to do so. Gardner was merely bluffing, since nothing

had changed the status of the "joint occupation" agreement of 1818, although diplomatic negotiations to attempt to bring about a final division of the Oregon Country would be set in motion later in the year. As a matter of fact, Gardner was a tresspasser on Mexican soil, although he undoubtedly did not realize it. The Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819 between the United States and Spain had established the forty-second parallel as the northern limit of Spanish -- and hence Mexican -- claims in the Far West; and the Weber River Valley was well south of that line. But Ogden was not, at least to British eyes, an interloper, since Britain was not a party to the 1819 compact and since the Hudson's Bay Company maintained that Spain, by a convention of 1790, had restricted her claims to "what she at that time held in actual settlement."[181]

Gardner and his Americans played upon the pent up resentment of the freemen, telling them that the Company treated them as slaves. The upshot of the matter was that over the next several days twenty-three of Ogden's men deserted, taking with them about 700 beaver skins and a number of horses. Only two or three (accounts differ) of the deserters paid their debts before leaving; the rest blithely walked away from their "heavy" indebtedness.[182] Badly outnumbered by the Americans, who assisted and protected the deserters, Ogden could do little to stem the tide.

On May 25, 1825, Ogden raised camp at "Deserter Point" and started to backtrack towards the Snake. The weakness of his party

made out of the question any attempt to follow Simpson's instructions to reach the Pacific Coast at Fort George.[183] The Snake was crossed on June 6, and Ogden was headed north for the Salmon River region when he learned from two Flathead Indians that the main camp of that friendly tribe was on Henry's Fork and that letters as well as an abundance of beaver were waiting for him there. The freemen who had remained with the expedition had been demanding a return to Flathead Post, but they consented to try this promising hunting ground. Ogden ascended the Snake and Henry's Fork, arriving at the Flathead camp on June 15. The Grand Tetons were clearly visible to the eastward. But on learning that there were American trappers in the vicinity and fearing that more of his freemen would desert to them, Ogden kept moving north and northeast. He crossed the Continental Divide by Monida Pass to the headwaters of the Missouri and the Big Hole country. Trapping and trading as he went, Ogden accumulated a fair haul of furs. He believed that by trading he kept the Indians' pelts from the Americans.[184]

On July 16, 1825, the party was just east of Gibbon Pass. Here William Kittson and two employees were detached to shepherd eighteen or twenty horses (here again accounts differ) loaded with furs to Flathead Post.[185] Once more the freemen wanted to break away and return to their home base, but by "threats & entreaties" Ogden prevailed upon them to remain. One of the

men's complaints was the poor quality of the Company's traps and trap chains. Ogden agreed with them. The equipment, he said, was "mere trash."[186]

The expedition then continued northeast over the upper drainage of the Missouri and once more crossed the Continental Divide to the upper waters of Clarks Fork of the Columbia. Ogden was once more back in the Oregon Country. About a month was spent trapping in the region of the present Anaconda and Deer Lodge, Montana. The most dramatic event that occurred during this period was the suicide on July 31 of the guide's wife during a fit of jealousy. Ogden expressed sympathy for the woman's four now-motherless children, but he wasted little sentiment on the guide who had three wives "& can afford to loose one."[187]

Crossing back into the Big Hole country, the expedition was harassed by Blackfoot horse thieves. In one encounter with Ogden's freemen the natives made away with all of Ogden's tobacco supply as well as a goodly amount of his other trade goods, to say nothing of six horses. Ogden was greatly discouraged. "I wish to God all these Villains were burning in Hell if there be such a place," he confided to his diary, although whether he was referring to the Indians or the freemen is not clear -- he was furious with both.[188]

By now Ogden had decided to bring the remnants of his brigade out by way of Fort Nez Percés. Three of the freemen refused to proceed, saying the [illegible]

remain with him, saying it was too dangerous to proceed southward. "I made an example of one," wrote Ogden, "but all in vain." The three deserters left for Flathead Post. Ogden then detached two additional men on September 26 to recover furs that had been cached and take them to the same station.[189]

With the remnant of his party left to him -- about twenty men -- Ogden turned southward and crossed the Continental Divide once more, probably by Monida Pass, and was back on the Snake drainage by September 30. Proceeding westward north of the Three Buttes he traversed a divide and reached the upper waters of the Lemhi River. From there he went southward to Little Lost River and then on to Big Lost River. The latter stream was ascended to its source, and on October 13 the party crossed the summit westward and dropped down to Big Wood River near the present Ketchum. Passing down Wood River and then westward by Camas Creek to the Boise River Ogden found that all the streams had been "well cleared of beaver" by Ross's party of the previous year. He continued northwestward to the Payette River, which was descended to its confluence with the Snake. That stream was forded on October 26, and Ogden proceeded by way of Burnt River to Fort Nez Percés, where he arrived on November 9, 1825.[190]

Ogden said that the results of his 1824-1825 expedition amounted to 4000 beaver, "certainly far from what we had a right to expect."[191] Of this number 2485 large parchment beaver pelts and 1210 small beaver skins were delivered at Flathead

Post, along with a small amount of other furs and castoreum, making a total of 3188 "made beaver" (a "made beaver" was a large prime beaver skin in excellent condition or its equivalent value in other skins or goods).[192] Chief Factor McLoughlin, manager of the Columbia District, estimated the expedition's profits at about £2000, but Governor Simpson later revised this figure upward to £3700.[193] The "Big Doctor" complained that the disastrous encounter with the Americans at "Deserter Point" had reduced the returns by approximately £3000.[194]

Ogden returned from his first expedition thoroughly discouraged with the prospects for the Snake Brigade. "You need not anticipate another expedition [in the] ensuing Year to this Country," he wrote to Governor Simpson and the Council while still in the field on June 27, 1825, "for not a freeman will return, and should they, it would be to join the Americans." At first he was inclined to blame his troubles on the disloyalty of the freemen and upon "that damn'd all cursed day that Mr. Ross consented to bring the 7 Americans with him to the Flat heads."[195] He also realized, however, that the higher prices paid by the Americans for furs were too tempting for the freemen to resist.

Chief Factor McLoughlin, who was at Fort Nez Percés when Ogden returned, did not subscribe to this last opinion. On August 9, 1825, he had received word of the defection of Ogden's men and of the territorial claims made by the American trappers. Infuriated by Gardner's threats, he was determined to send

another party to the Snake Country if possible "to defy" the Americans even if the expeditions were thereafter abandoned. He had little sympathy for the complaints of the freemen and employees, pointing out that the Company had not wished to give them credit and did the men a favor in doing so, since the firm stood to lose the property should debtors die or be killed.[196]

But McLoughlin must have received some faint insight into the true situation from Ogden, for by October 6 he had taken modest preliminary steps to ease the lot of the trappers. He told the London Committee that traps "were made Stronger since last year than they used to be," and he wrote to Ogden to reduce the price of the men's outfits to the lower Fort Vancouver tariff "to induce them to remain on this side of the Mountains."[197]

It had not taken McLoughlin long to learn, once he had talked with Ogden, that the returns of the 1824-1825 expedition were "very handsome."[198] Following a plan he had been contemplating for some time, he ordered Ogden to return to the Snake Country at once, though his route was at first to be westward to join and take command of the expedition which had been sent out during the summer under Finan McDonald and Thomas McKay to trap and explore in the region south and southeast of Fort Vancouver. On November 9 McLoughlin believed McDonald to be only a four day's march from Walla Walla.[199]

Ogden was allowed only twelve days to rest and to refit his party after have been nearly a year in the snows and burning

sun of the Snake Country. This quick turn around was possible because McLoughlin, though hampered by not knowing to which post Ogden would "come out," had as early as June begun to order the purchase of the needed horses and supplies. Among the goods he directed his subordinates to collect were "3 good new lodges, 40 Apichimons [sections of buffalo robes employed instead of saddle cloths], 20 pack saddles, 200 fathoms of pack cords, and 12 elk skins."[200] This time McLoughlin saw to it that the number of engagés was far greater than that of the freemen, a cost the Columbia manager regretted but considered necessary to save the expedition.[201] Indeed, he did not have much choice since there were relatively few freemen available.[202]

Although the "Big Doctor," as McLoughlin was known to his peers, was adamant about showing the British flag through all the Oregon Country, he still was not sure that the Snake brigades would prove profitable in the long run. Circumstances, he wrote to the Governor and Council on March 26, 1826, will tell "whether it is our interest or not to keep up the Snake Expedition, perhaps we are on the Eve of being obliged to withdraw from it."[203]

Before following the fortunes of Ogden as he set out once more for the wilderness, two significant results of his first expedition should be noted. McLoughlin could be a stern man, but he was also a fair one. After listening to the complaints of the freemen at Walla Walla, he had the account books of the Spokane District sent down to Fort Vancouver and studied them carefully.

He found that the made beaver turned in by Ogden in the fall of 1825 had cost the Company only 10 shillings 2-1/2 pence each. Of this amount a mere 2 s. was paid to the freemen when one considered the prices they were charged for their personal supplies, which were valued at a seventy per cent advance over prime cost. The difference between the total cost and the amount the freemen received was due to "losses incurred by desertion and by expenses in sending in clerks and servants to watch over them" -- in other words, to overhead.[204] Further study convinced McLoughlin that the real problem was the "enormously" high prices charged the freemen for their outfits. He pointed out to the London directors that some trappers who turned in 150 made beaver found that even "this was not sufficient to pay [for] their Hunting supplies and their Losses in Horses and traps stolen by the Natives."[205]

The Columbia manager saw the light. If the freemen were treated more generously they would remain loyal, desertions and the resulting losses of furs and balances due would be reduced, and overhead in the form of supervisory personnel could be cut. The Company could well afford concessions. On his own responsibility, since it would take many months to get permission from Governor Simpson and the Committee in London, McLoughlin before the start of Ogden's third expedition in September, 1826, agreed to pay 10 s. for every large prime beaver and half that amount for cubs. The tariff for personal items bought by the freemen was reduced to that paid by regular employees -- fifty per cent

above prime cost for imported goods -- while "hunting Implements" were sold at inventory prices. Freemen were charged only £2 for horses, and at the end of an expedition the men could turn in their implements for full credit, being charged merely for those lost or for the cost of repairing those broken.[206] These changes were later approved by Simpson and by the Governor and Committee. During March, 1827, the London directors told Simpson: "We can afford to pay as good a price as the Americans and where there is risk of meeting their parties it is necessary to pay as much or something more . . . . By attempting to make such expeditions too profitable the whole may be lost."[207]

The second important consequence of Ogden's 1824-1825 hunt resulted from correspondence he sent to his superiors when he was on the upper waters of the Missouri. These letters made it only too plain that he was operating on American soil contrary to United States law. This knowledge did not bother Simpson or McLoughlin who viewed such trespasses with equanimity, but the London directors, who were responsible for the Company's reputation at home and abroad, were disturbed. Strict orders were issued against any more such incursions. While trespasses did not entirely cease in the future, the directives put an effective end to the use of Flathead Post as a base for the Snake expeditions, since the route from there to the Snake Country necessarily involved a short traverse east of the Continental Divide.[208]

When Ogden set out from Walla Walla on his second Snake Expedition on November 21, 1825, his party was woefully weak for such a dangerous journey. In fact, it was largely to bring the company up to a respectable strength that he had been ordered to take over Finan McDonald's Umpqua party. Since the combined brigades numbered only "about 50 Gentlemen & Servants" and since McDonald's expedition, at least at its start, was composed of twenty-two engagés, two freemen, and six Indians, Ogden must have had only about twenty companions with him at the outset.[209] One of these was Clerk Thomas Dears, a Company employee since 1817.

Ogden followed the south bank of the Columbia River westward until the Deschutes River was reached not far above The Dalles. Crossing the stream, the party turned southwest and south by way of the present Fifteenmile Creek, White River, and Tygh Creek. On December 8 Clerk Thomas McKay and four men from McDonald's party came into camp with the news that their brigade was only a short distance away. The next day the two companies were united on the Deschutes River near the present Warm Springs Indian Agency, Jefferson County, Oregon.

McDonald had collected only 460 beaver, and his equipment and horses were in miserable condition. Even more discouraging to Ogden, McDonald had failed to obtain a native guide to point the way to the rumored rich trapping grounds where the combined brigades were supposed to operate. McDonald reported having found the country in that direction -- southward toward the

Klamath region -- to be "destitute of provisions."[210]

In view of these unpromising circumstances, Ogden decided that the season was "too far advanced" to push on toward his original objective. He therefore determined to head for the Burnt River area which had appeared a promising hunting ground when he visited it earlier in the year. He increased the efficiency of his force by sending several Indians and four engagés or freemen, "invalids," back to Fort Vancouver, and after a good deal of trouble he found a Snake Indian willing to serve as guide. The combined parties then set off in a southeast direction until they reached Crooked River, which was ascended eastward for a considerable distance. Trapping along this stream was fairly productive at first, but on the night of December 21 freezing weather brought ice to the beaver waters, and yields declined. The Snake Expeditions had always depended for food upon the beaver and other game killed in the field, and as Ogden's party advanced up Crooked River in the extreme cold few animals fell victim to the hunters. Christmas Day was spent in gloom. "Not 20 lbs. of Food of any kind remaining this evening in Camp," Ogden wrote in his journal.[211]

The men were nearly starving as they crossed from the Deschutes drainage eastward to the South Fork of the John Day River. Conditions moderated as this stream was ascended, but the horses still fared badly. "It is painful to see them crawl," Ogden noted on January 21, 1826.[212] Traversing another divide

to the eastward, the brigade reached the upper Burnt River, which was descended almost to its junction with the Snake not far from the present Huntington, Oregon. When Ogden noted the barren region along Burnt River, "covered with wormwood [sagebrush] and sandy soil," he remarked, "this surely is Snake Country."[213]

Even before they arrived on the Snake the men resembled "so many Skeletons," and Ogden was heartily glad to see once again this river which promised better times.[214] Having been disappointed by the trapping along Burnt River, he decided to try his luck on three streams said not to have been visited by hunters since 1819.[215] The route was now eastward along the south bank of the Snake. The weather turned cold again, and the scarcity of game and beaver had by February 16 reduced the men "to Skin and bones." Most of them were "without a shoe to their feet," a condition which, Ogden remarked, "in this cold weather on frozen ground is far from being comfortable."[216]

On February 22, from a camp not far above the mouth of the Owyhee River, Ogden was forced by the weakness of his horses and the lack of food to detach two parties to trap at a distance. Jean Baptiste Gervais and seven men were sent back to the region already traversed, while Antoine Sylvaille and five companions were directed to the Owyhee and Malheur Rivers. The latter group was to rejoin Ogden on the headwaters of the Owyhee as the expedition was on its return march, but "not being able to proceed

thither" they returned to Fort Vancouver by way of The Dalles after discovering "a Country abounding in Beaver."[217] Gervais's party also reached the Columbia depot in safety prior to July 17, 1826, having failed to make the appointed rendezvous with Ogden's main company. Little is known of their route or adventures.[218]

Ogden's brigade then continued eastward, crossing to the north side of the Snake near the present Hammett, Idaho. On March 4 fifteen deer were killed, ten of them by that redoubtable hunter, Thomas McKay. "So we shall begin to live again," Ogden thankfully recorded in his journal.[219] Nine days later thirteen elk were slain, five of them by McKay. More elk were brought down during the next several days. Ogden was optimistic. "Every one appears cheerful," he wrote.[220]

But on March 20 Ogden's mood sank to pessimism once more. While camped opposite the mouth of Raft River he heard from some Indians that a party of Americans and Iroquois was not more than three days' march away. "If this be the case . . . our hunts are damn'd," he remarked. He anticipated that some of his men would desert because of the suffering they had endured. Preparing to do the best he could, Ogden made a difficult crossing of the Snake, during which a horse belonging to one of the freemen was drowned. "This to the owner at this season was a most serious loss but in this ill fated Country we are all more or less subject to meet reverses," was Ogden's philisophical understatement.